

Sermon #1,231: Revelation 7:13-17 (Hymns: #554, 100, Te Deum, 389:5-7)
11-6-16, Commemoration of All Saints, Bethany-Princeton MN

THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT IS AN ANSWER TO PRAYERS

Prayer: Dear Lord God, heavenly Father: Persuade us today, through Your Word, that we will see again the Christians whom You have taken to heaven. Keep before us the beautiful picture of their life in heaven: that they have on the white robes of the redeemed, that they have palms of victory in their hands, and that You have wiped all tears out of their eyes. Make this a motivation to us, ever to faithfully use Your means of grace, so we may be kept in faith and come to the joys they have. Amen.

The Sermon Text, Revelation 7:13-17. ¹³ Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. ¹⁶ They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Catechism Lesson: Lord's Prayer, 6th and 7th Petitions

And lead us not into temptation. What does this mean?

C: God certainly tempts no one to sin, but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our own flesh may not deceive us nor lead us into misbelief, despair, and other shameful sin and vice; and though we be thus tempted, that we may still in the end overcome and retain the victory.

But deliver us from evil. What does this mean?

C: We pray in this petition, as the sum of all, that our Father in heaven would deliver us from every evil of body and soul, property and honor; and at last, when the hour of death shall come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, who has redeemed you by His blood to an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and which does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:3-4):

What would we do without these verses? If we didn't have the book of Revelation – as hard to understand as it is – it would mean we had to do without this scene of victory. No, thank you! I want this picture.

I need this picture. Especially when we are going to vote in 2 days in a presidential election where everyone seems to feel that we have sunk to a new low and they wonder what the future holds for our country. We need this picture of heaven when things are so bleak on earth! And as far as our church goes, especially after the last year when we lost so many of our own and we are certainly not over it or past it but it often feels like we're still in the middle of it, I desperately need this picture of heaven.

This picture of the church in heaven is the answer to prayers. Now we ask God these questions in a lot of ways in our own prayers, when we are thinking of ourselves – whether we will make it to heaven – or if we are thinking of our loved ones. But in the Lord's Prayer, He covers and includes all our individual prayers in this great prayer. So specifically Revelation 7 is God's answer to the last two petitions of the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation," and: "Deliver us from evil."

First I want to say that because it is God's answer, something only He knows, that means He is revealing it – unveiling or uncovering what John and all of us on earth can't see. That's where the book of Revelation gets its name. The whole book is a "revelation" given to St. John the apostle, something revealed to him by the ascended Lord Jesus Himself. Only He can reveal the answer to these two petitions. Let's take the first one:

1. "Lead us not into temptation."

He deals with this in the second part of the angel's rhetorical question to John, when he says: "**Where did they come from?**" The answer begins: "**These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation.**"

This says that it is all those who, during their life on earth, were in the great tribulation. Some people imagine that this refers only to some really horrible time right near the end of the world, that the "great" tribula-

tion hasn't come yet. But the Bible says: "*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God*" (Ac 14:22). Tribulation is simply trouble. Tribulations are trials, which are another word for tempting or testing.

This brings us to the prayer, "Lead us not into temptation." God does not tempt anyone to sin. The devil is the tempter. But his tempting us, or even the troubles that we have living in a world of sin, are only a means to an end. The devil wants to get you to sin, but that isn't his real goal. As the words from the catechism indicate, he is really trying to "*lead us into misbelief, despair, or other shameful sin ...*"

He tempts you, he gets you to sin, so that when you feel guilty you will fall into despair and think that you can't be forgiven, God can't possibly love you, etc. His goal is for you to have shame, such shame that you feel that you can't approach God. His goal is for your dwelling on your sin so that you don't believe God has forgiveness for you; this is "misbelief" - the worst unbelief is not what the Muslims or Mormons do, it's when Christians don't think God can forgive them. Then they've lost the true knowledge of God, whose very nature and essence is to forgive.

Another trick of the devil is to discourage you by how your life is going, or how the world is going. It becomes so important to you that you feel you can't be happy or have a good life unless this or that happens: the right job, enough money, the right president, or the defeat of all evil. Where is God in that picture? These other things are taking His place.

It isn't wrong for Christians to groan at what they suffer in this life. The tribulations can and should be the impetus to pray. That's how to use them. "*Have we trials and temptations? ... Take it to the Lord in prayer.*" But it is such a fine line. It is always this close to defeating our faith.

What is the answer? "*That would God would guard and keep us ...*" so that "*we may still in the end overcome and retain the victory.*" This picture of the people in heaven shows the answer: all the people, from Adam and Eve until the end of time - including John's brother James who was martyred, and as we look at this scene in 2016 with him we can see by faith that Sara, Collin, Marion and Loraine are there - it is God's answer that He guarded and kept them. They have the victory. But how? The answer is what God says to the prayer:

2. "Deliver us from evil."

How did they come out of the great tribulation? How are they now safe? How did people whose sins we saw, whose sadnesses we felt, whose weaknesses and frailties we knew, whom we saw not just at their best but also at their worst, whose struggles we were well aware of, how did they come to be there where there is no sin or suffering? How will we?

The answer comes, that they **"washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple."**

This is all about Jesus. He is the Lamb. He is the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world. He was led as a lamb to be slaughtered. As a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. He was wounded for our transgressions. He hurt and He bled, but it was His holy precious blood. He was the spotless innocent Lamb who was willing to be guilty for everyone and pay everyone's penalty.

This is how Sara, Collin, Marion and Loraine washed their robes. Jesus washed them with His blood, and miraculously they come out white. They needed to be washed clean, meaning they were full of sin. You need to be washed clean, meaning you are full of sin. The temptations have gotten the best of us. We are not overcomers. We are sinners. But Jesus overcame. His blood is holy because He overcame every temptation and His faith and trust remained perfect. He did this for you. But that's not all. He wants you to receive what He did. So for each of these whom we still grieve, and for you too, Jesus comes with His blood, to wash and cleanse, to work repentance and faith, to make you white.

This is how He keeps His promise to *"grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven."* Notice that's how it is in Revelation 7. It isn't about going to a place. It's about going to Him, to Jesus, the Lamb. It says they are serving Him, the Lamb is dwelling in the midst of them, He is shepherding them and gently leading them. It's similar to what Jesus says in John 14: *"I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am there you may be also."*

This tells us something about Jesus coming to us now. From Jesus' perspective His coming to you in His Word, and Sacraments, is really no different than His coming to them in the hour of death. Now He comes to you a sinner and receives you to Himself; He forgives you and clears away all that is wrong and receives you into His bosom. At the hour of death He comes and receives you to Himself, through His forgiveness, nothing is wrong, and He receives you into His bosom for eternity.

This really happened for our loved ones who went to be with Him. He received them to Himself in heaven. He receives you to Himself now. He answers all the prayers. They are where Jesus is, where the angels are, where all the departed Christians are, where there is only love and rejoicing and victory. That's where **"they are,"** it says, because Jesus came and received them to Himself. That's where you will be too, by Jesus coming and receiving you to Himself. You are His victory. Amen!